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Representations of Catholicism in the Twentieth-Century Irish Novel

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Irish and Catholic?

Towards an understanding of identity



Edited by Louise Fuller, John Littleton and Eamon Maher

Introduction

There is possibly no subject that exercises Irish people's minds and arouses such heated debate as Catholicism. The majority religion has undergone a torrid time in Ireland during the past few decades. Ever since Noel Browne's ill-fated attempt to get a set of proposals known as 'The Mother and Child Scheme' through the Dáil in 1951, there have been numerous events that altered forever the attitude to Catholicism among those living in a rapidly changing Irish society. In spite of maintaining a veneer of power during the 1950s and 60s, particularly because of the special relationship it enjoyed with politicians, an increasingly well-educated Irish population was becoming more and more reluctant to allow the Church to dominate the agenda, particularly in the areas of sexual relations, education and social justice. A series of divisive referenda on divorce and abortion during the 1980s and 90s showed strong support for the Church's position in rural areas and a corresponding wave of secularism in the cities.

Contraception and divorce are now legally available in Ireland and the position in relation to abortion is somewhat ambiguous as a result of the 'X' case; homosexual practices are no longer a criminal offence; there is a crisis of vocations to the priesthood and religious life; revelations of physical and sexual abuse in industrial schools and the laundries that were administered mainly by religious orders and then, of course, clerical child abuse, have shaken the faithful to the core; the scandals involving high-powered figures like Eamonn Casey and Michael Cleary, two well-known clerics who were discovered to have fathered children, have revealed that priests are human like

everyone else. The Jesuit priest, Joseph Veale, writing in 2000, pointed out that the wound inflicted by the clerical abuse scandal was nothing so superficial as the loss of influence or diminished power. It went far deeper than that, right to the core of how Irish people related to the Catholic Church. It might have been so different if evidence of genuine repentance for the hurt and damage caused had been forthcoming from the beginning:

The Church is in shock. Many are in denial. The disclosure of sex-abuse and cruelty came when people were already disenchanted with the Church, with the whole set-up, with religion in general. That goes back a long way. It was masked by a smugness on the part of the official Church and a deference and conformism in the presence of clergy ... The sin-less priest, not fully human, was a fiction. No one really believed it, but it served a purpose to pretend. The revelations of abuse fell into a culture that for decades had seen through clerical screens.¹

Veale rightly detected that the experience of Catholicism that many Irish people had was a negative one, especially in relation to sexuality: '... their sexual lives, the central energy of their humanity, whether they are married or not, were mucked up by Catholicism.' (Veale, p 298) Many commentators make the point that the Catholic Church in Ireland became synonymous with a distrustful attitude towards sex which seemed to be invariably linked to sin. In Kevin Myers' view, however, 'the determining factor in all this was not the priest, not the hierarchy, but the taboo.'² This is something that is often overlooked when dealing with the emotive issue of Irish Catholic identity: the extent to which the institutional Church was merely a reflection of the society which spawned it and allowed the Catholic clergy almost unbridled power for the best part of a century. As Myers states: 'No Taoiseach over the past three decades would have dared to

1. Joseph Veale, 'Meditating on abuse – and repenting', in *Doctrine and Life*, May-June 2000, pp 296-303, pp 297-8.

2. Kevin Myers, 'An Irishman's Diary', *The Irish Times*, 3 November, 2005, p 17.

instigate a wholesale investigation into clerical child abuse and survived even a day.' Society was complicit in the incarceration of young women found pregnant outside of wedlock, or in the committal to industrial schools of children engaged in 'anti-social behaviour' or from homes that could not afford to feed them. The Catholic Church and its priests and bishops acted as a sort of 'moral police force' for a long time in Ireland, because that was the role the population expected from them. They inspired much love and devotion and these in turn led to power and domination. When their authority was questioned, therefore, it is not surprising that they reacted by attempting to crush the opposition. As their power began to slip, the desire was strong to hold on to its vestiges by whatever means possible. Tom Inglis wrote in the wake of the publication of *The Ferns Report*:

There was a time when people trusted the Church. It supposedly told us the truth about life and death. While other organisations had material interests, the Church was only interested in proclaiming the truth. Now we see that it has an almost pathological inability to tell the truth about itself.³

Shrewd and fair analyst that he is, however, Inglis echoes Kevin Myers's comments quoted earlier by stipulating that the Catholic hierarchy in this country merely showed itself to possess the same sort of weaknesses as those displayed by any group that enjoys a monopoly of power: 'The problem of trust is, of course, wider than the Catholic Church. We used to believe in the honesty and integrity of all those in authority – whether they were politicians, gardaí, solicitors, bank managers, journalists or many others. We were led to believe that they were above reproach.'⁴ Mary Kenny too believes that there should always be a distinction drawn between the Church as institution and the concept of faith. While the faithful can be (indeed, must be) appalled at stories of abuse perpetrated on children by priests, that does not mean that people automatically lose their faith as a

3. Tom Inglis, 'Something Rotten in the Barrel Itself', *The Irish Times*, 3 November, 2005, p 16.

4. 'Something Rotten in the Barrel Itself', p 16.

result of these revelations: 'The Church is the institution and subject to as many errors as any other institutions – the law, the media, the bureaucracies, business.'⁵ But it is not possible for everyone to distinguish between the message of the gospel and the human weaknesses of those (a tiny minority) who, while involved in active ministry, perpetrated heinous crimes on innocent children.

Nevertheless, what is particularly annoying for the many people who are attracted to the positive message contained in the Catholic faith is the way in which the Irish bishops seemed prepared to do almost anything to avoid facing up to the ineptitude that characterised their management of the scandals. They needed to be more humble, more prepared to listen and repent. But the clerical mindset was not particularly adept at listening. Joseph Veale, while accepting the huge amount of damage done to the Church's reputation by the failure to deal in an adequate manner with the scandals, felt that it could have a positive side: 'The loss of power will turn out to have been a blessing. We will need to let go generously and freely because it is closer to the mind of Christ.'⁶ These words find an echo in the spiritual diary of the French priest-writer, Jean Sullivan (1913-1980), who said in relation to the French Church of the 1970s: 'Like the storm clouds of the exodus, the Church's face today is more luminous than when it seemed to rule. It has found glory in its humiliation.'⁷ Maybe that is what will happen to the Irish Church in the coming years as its power and influence begin to wane: it could well find 'glory in its humiliation'.

The decision to organise a conference at The Priory Institute, Tallaght on 23-24 June 2005 was prompted by a genuine desire to engage with the issue of Irish Catholic identity at what is definitely a crucial and difficult time for the Church in this country. The organisers were keen that it not be seen as simply another

5. Mary Kenny, 'Church is Damaged – but Our Faith will Endure', *The Sunday Independent*, 30 October, 2005, p 24.

6. 'Meditating on Abuse', p 302.

7. Jean Sullivan, *Morning Light*, translated by Joseph Cunneen and Patrick Gormally (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p 149.

'clerical talk-shop' and that equally it should not just engage in a simple exercise of 'Church bashing.' Debate is very necessary between numerous stakeholders if the Catholic Church in Ireland is to have any hope of assuming an effective role in a changed society. It is natural to be fearful of change if it impacts upon you personally. Brendan Hoban makes that point forcibly:

If you are part of a tradition, it is very difficult to become part of the dismantling of the same tradition. If you give a wedge of your life to any activity, it is extremely difficult to stand back and set that work in a realistic context. The bigger the institution, the more sacred the tradition, the more difficult it is to ask hard questions about it.⁸

Difficult, but fair, questions were posed at the conference. Participants analysed the issue of Irish Catholic identity from a number of different angles, using history, theology, literature, literary theory, sociology and personal reflection as their points of departure. What emerges is not intended to be a definitive statement in relation to what is a highly complex issue: more a starting point in a process that may well result in a more open debate going forward on the issue of Irish Catholicism and the important role it has played, continues to play and will play in forging a certain notion of Irish identity.

We are grateful to The Priory Institute and ITT Dublin for supporting the conference, to the participants for the benefit of their thoughts in the form of papers or comments, and to Seán O Boyle of The Columba Press for the vision he displayed in seeing the value of publishing this book.

8. Brendan Hoban, *Change or Decay: Irish Catholicism in Crisis* (Kilglass: Banley House, 2004), p 60.

CHAPTER SIX

Representations of Catholicism in the Twentieth-Century Irish Novel

Eamon Maher

In spite of the fact that the earliest Irish novelists writing in English were Protestants (most notably Maria Edgeworth and Lady Morgan, alias Sydney Owenson), Catholicism became an extremely potent influence on the twentieth century Irish novel. This is not surprising when one considers that the majority religion in this country has historically been so closely bound up with our nationalism, politics and culture. Given the prominence of Catholicism in the evolution of Irish society, I think it would be enlightening to consider the reasons why there never emerged here a genre referred to as the 'Catholic novel', along the lines of what one comes across in France with writers like Georges Bernanos and François Mauriac, or in England with Graham Greene, G. K. Chesterton and Evelyn Waugh. In order to ascertain why we never had a Catholic novel in Ireland, we first of all need to establish what exactly Catholic literature is. In this respect, John Whitehouse's *Catholics on Literature*¹ is an invaluable reference. Whitehouse, in addition to two very insightful essays of his own, supplies extracts from a number of what are commonly considered the most important Catholic writers. In these essays, the authors try to tease out the ways in which their religious faith informed and influenced what they wrote. There is no accepted school of Catholic writers, in the same way as there is no specifically Catholic way of reading and critically assessing literature, which makes the task I have set myself quite perilous. Whitehouse quotes Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, in which the latter stated: 'A Christian work would have the artist, as artist, free.' (Whitehouse, p 14) This is a rule

1. John Whitehouse, *Catholics on Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997). Subsequent quotes from this book will be in brackets.

that all novelists, irrespective of their religious allegiance, would do well to follow. The work of art is not about edification or instruction; it is not implicitly didactic, even though one often finds a moral behind what is being expressed. Whitehouse draws a distinction between Catholic writing and Catholic literature. The former seeks to persuade and influence, even to convince, whereas the latter 'is fundamentally artistic, the fictional expression of idiosyncratic and subjective insights rather than general and analytical ratiocination' (Whitehouse, p 15). He concludes: 'In short, when we talk of Catholic literature in our own day, we are talking of a literature marked by faith, or the tensions of faith, and noticeable as such in the surrounding secularised world' (Whitehouse, p 17).

He goes on to speak of how the 'Catholic novelists' were explorers rather than expounders of their religious beliefs. They liked to delve into the dramas associated with faith. These dramas have a universal significance because they are at one and the same time human and metaphysical. Greene's whiskey priest in *The Power and the Glory* or the flawed police officer in *The Heart of the Matter*, are made up of flesh and blood like the rest of us and are thus prone to temptations and momentary weaknesses. What raises them above the ordinary is their unrelenting attention to Catholic dogma. Readers suspect that these men may well be saints in spite of their human faults. Many novels by Graham Greene have Catholicism as their central interest. This is also true of Bernanos's masterpieces, *The Diary of a Country Priest* and *Under Satan's Sun*, which have priests as their main protagonists. With Bernanos, the dramas of Catholicism are acted out in a spectacular fashion. Wrong decisions could well lead to eternal damnation: sin and grace, good and evil are omnipresent – God and Satan are vying for people's souls in a world that is tottering on the edge of an abyss. There is much theology in Bernanos's writing: reference is regularly made to the Communion of Saints and the substitution of souls, concepts about which you hear very little today! Satan assumes a human form and evil is palpable. With Mauriac, Catholicism is much

more subtly interwoven through the text. His main preoccupation is with the psychological probing of his characters, some of whom, though fatally flawed, end up, as happens in Graham Greene, as possible saints – there can be no doubting the fact that Bernanos's country priest is a saint. The hero of Mauriac's *The Nest of Vipers*, Louis, is a typical example of someone whose disdain for the hypocritical religious observance of his family blinded him momentarily to the true value of Catholic teaching. But before his death, this unwavering sceptic sees the light and reconciles himself with God. What this novel and others like it show us is that Catholicism has the right ingredients for producing powerful literature, provided, of course, that the writer remains at a certain remove from what he is portraying. Bernanos, a man of trenchant views, especially when it came to Catholicism, wrote:

The first duty of a writer is to produce good books, in the light of his own ideas of his art and the resources at his disposal, without special consideration for anything or anyone, for every book bears witness and hence must above all be sincere ... Mediocre art is a scandal, and even more of a scandal when it claims to be edifying (Whitehouse, p 26).

These sentiments could have been uttered by the Irish novelist, John McGahern, who has always maintained that the only responsibility of a writer is to 'get his words right'. When that stylistic element is properly rendered, then the writing will reflect everything it is capable of reflecting. Bernanos is correct in his assertion that art alone is what counts for serious writers. They are keenly aware that a thick line must be drawn between literature and propaganda. This is probably why Mauriac, Bernanos and Greene all rejected the tag 'Catholic novelist' and preferred to refer to themselves as writers who also happened to be Catholics.² The distinction is an important one: the quality of the

2. Both Mauriac and Bernanos were interviewed by Frédéric Lefèvre on his radio programme *Une heure avec...* In 1923, in reply to Lefèvre's somewhat provocative opening question, 'Monsieur François Mauriac, Catholic novelist?', Mauriac replied: 'I am a novelist; I am a Catholic –

writing takes precedence over any theological or religious dimension in their works.

When you consider the flowering of the Catholic novel in France and England, what is striking is the fact that it emerged at a time when Catholicism was no longer the strong force it had once been in both of these countries. Ever since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, France had become a polarised society and one in which Republicanism and secularism were pitted in opposition to religion. There was an official separation of Church and State in 1905 and in the novels of Bernanos, for example, Catholicism had become obsolete for many people. The curé d'Ambricourt felt that his parish was being eaten up by a cancer and it is suggested that his own death from the same disease is as a result of his assuming the evil he encounters at every turn. Similarly, in Graham Greene's England, Catholicism was a minority religion, which did not prevent him and other novelists making it a central element of what is commonly regarded as their best work – Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* is a remarkable illustration of this. In my opinion, what prevented the emergence of a Catholic novel in Ireland is that up until the last couple of decades Catholicism was too dominant a force (perhaps even too commonplace) for writers to engage with it in a

and there is the conflict ... I believe, in fact, that it is fortunate for a novelist to be a Catholic, but I am also quite sure that it is very dangerous for a Catholic to be a novelist.' Mauriac appears to view the problem in terms of a certain conflict between the role of novelist who must deal with the miseries of the flesh and that of the Catholic who must not lead his readers into moral danger. When it was suggested to him by the same interviewer that the Catholic Novel does not exist, Bernanos concurred but then went on to explain that Catholicism is not an option, not a particular optic on life which the writer can choose to adopt or reject. All art which seeks to enlighten the inner life of Man is bound to explore sin, and thus all literature which sets itself this aim is Catholic literature: all novels are Catholic novels. From these comments it can be seen just how difficult it can be to pin down the exact ingredients that go in to making the Catholic Novel. To read the Lefèvre interviews in full, see *Une Heure avec...* (Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Française, 1924).

sympathetic manner. There was little opportunity for critical appraisal of matters pertaining to faith here.

Whenever writers wandered from the status quo, by seeking to engage with the daily human dramas, especially anything remotely connected to sexuality, they were promptly brought to heel by the Censorship of Publications Board and had their books banned. This even happened to those who, like Kate O'Brien, displayed a great admiration and reverence for Catholic practices in their work. Dermot Bolger makes the following remark about the changed climate in Ireland today compared to a few decades ago:

Growing up in Ireland in the 1960s, it was like you had these huge puppets of oppression, or alleged repression, to whom you could take a baseball bat and smash them. There's a new generation for whom de Valera or John Charles McQuaid mean nothing – their shadows don't stretch that far – and that's great. But their targets are far less obvious than mine were.³

What Bolger is saying essentially is that the twin pillars of Church and State were the normal targets of writers in the 1960s. By the 1990s, this has changed dramatically and writers no longer felt the same need to pillory structures that were exerting less influence in a more progressive, global and secular Ireland. In his play, *The Passion of Jerome*, Bolger decided to present what he figured would be the most terrifying prospect for the average Irish inhabitant of the Celtic Tiger period: a divine apparition. That a secular-minded, middle-aged man who is having an affair with a woman in a flat in Ballymun should be visited by *stigmati* rendered many theatre-goers in this country extremely uncomfortable – the play was much more warmly received in France. The wheel has come full circle to such an extent that today countless Irish people are totally averse to even allowing room for a reasoned discussion of Catholicism. This may explain

3. 'Being a Writer in Ireland in the 1970s and Today.' Interview between Eamon Maher and Dermot Bolger, in *Doctrine and Life*, 55, 8, pp 28-38, pp 37-8.

the wide variety of prisms through which the new generation of Irish novelists view Ireland and Irishness.

Seán Ó Faoláin had a continental perspective, which helped him to offer a good critique of Irish society in the numerous essays he wrote during the 1930s and 40s in reviews like the *Virginia Quarterly Review* and *The Bell*. Writing in the former, in 1935, he mused on the issue of Catholic writing and stated that the Catholic writer chooses to see man as midway between everything and nothing:

I find in all of them [Catholic novelists] a painful self-consciousness, as if they could not forget they were Catholics, a timidity evident in their fear of the senses, a priggishness and a solemnity which has nothing to do with religion and for which there is no excuse, a lack of humour, and a tendency to underwrite about the emotions as if they feared to raise a storm they could not ride ... These tendencies, though ... highly laudable in the writer as a Catholic, are in the writer as a writer the signs of some basic weakness that is, apparently, fatal to his work.⁴

He expressed pity for the Catholic writer who suffers from the feeling that art poses some danger to religion – such a conviction deprives him of detachment. He continued: 'For, the whole human drama is surely the drama of the Seven Deadly Sins, and any novelist who attempts to avoid them is avoiding reality.'⁵ Irish novelists did not, in fairness, neglect sin, as they knew that it possessed a fertile ground for exploration. But it was an area that troubled Mauriac quite a bit. If the source of the novel is ultimately humanity in its various guises, then there is a fair chance that it will involve portraying sinful behaviour. Sin is far more interesting from an artistic perspective than sanctity. Mauriac came up with the following solution to his dilemma: purify the source. By this he meant that he saw his responsibility as a novelist as being to write with a pure heart so that those

4. 'The Modern Novel: A Catholic Point of View', in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol II (1935), pp 339-51, p 345.

5. Ó Faoláin, 'The Modern Novel', p 346.

who would subsequently read him would not be contaminated. Ó Faoláin did not recognise this as a legitimate approach. He felt it was not acceptable that the person of a religious disposition should distrust the flesh (as Mauriac most definitely did) and therefore do injustice to the natural impurity of life by glossing over what is unseemly. He maintained that Catholic novelists 'have falsified life by their refusal to handle manfully the drama of the Seven Deadly Sins. They have the strange delusion that they can present a brothel without mentioning the whore.'⁶

The position of the Catholic novelist in Ireland was often rendered uncomfortable on several fronts. Firstly, in a country that was coming to terms with its newly found Independence from British rule (in the 26 counties, that is) Catholicism was a bulwark of the ruling classes and was used as a means of distinguishing us from the English. The sort of Catholicism that developed here became strongly linked to republicanism, in spite of the fact that eighteenth-century nationalism was almost exclusively led by Protestants such as Robert Emmet, Wolfe Tone and Jonathan Swift. It should also be stated that the Catholic hierarchy was wary of nationalists and even went so far as to excommunicate members of the IRA during the War of Independence. It is ironic that the fruit of the armed struggle, which they opposed, opened the way for the most unchallenged period of clerical power ever experienced in Ireland. Once they became aware of the dangers posed by communism in the wake of the Second World War, the Irish Catholic Church began to reinvent a certain notion of Irishness being synonymous with Catholicism. Bishops like John Charles McQuaid in Dublin, who played a major role in the sacking of John McGahern from his position as a primary teacher after the banning of his second novel, *The Dark*, in 1965, felt secure enough to dictate to a largely submissive laity. Here is Louise Fuller's assessment of the bishops' approach:

The bishops repeatedly warned about the dangers of the

6. 'It no longer Matters or the Death of the English Novel', in *The Criterion*, Vol XV, No 58, October 1935, pp 49-56, pp 54-5.

modern world – dangers arising from dancing, ‘evil literature’, modern song, drinking and so-called ‘company-keeping’. In the minds of the bishops, these seemed to constitute the concrete symptoms of the advancing tide of secularist attitudes which had already engulfed neighbouring countries, and which they were determined to resist at all costs.⁷

It should come as no surprise that because the hierarchy pushed such a repressive agenda, many of our novelists became estranged from Catholicism in its institutional manifestation. That did not prevent someone like John McGahern, a lapsed Catholic, regretting the power and beauty of the religious symbolism and rituals of his youth. Like many of his generation, his mother had hoped and prayed that one day he would become a priest. In his recent *Memoir*, we read:

After the Ordination Mass I would place my freshly anointed hands in blessing on my mother’s head. We’d live together in the priest’s house and she’d attend each morning Mass and take communion from my hands. When she died, I’d include her in all the Masses that I’d say until we were united in the joy of heaven.⁸

The rift between most writers and their Catholic faith became more pronounced as the power of the hierarchy began to grow.

7. Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism Since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004), p 52.

8. John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p 63. There are close parallels between Patrick Kavanagh’s and McGahern’s love of Catholic liturgy. This is how Antoinette Quinn describes Kavanagh’s memories of the church services of his youth: ‘The liturgical aspects of Catholicism appealed to the young Patrick’s burgeoning aesthetic sense: the altar dressed with flowers and candles, the gorgeous vestments, the gleam of wine being poured into the gold chalice at Mass, the pages of ‘the Golden Book’ reverentially turned.’ (*Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2001), p 28) Compare this to the following lines by McGahern: ‘The church ceremonies always gave me pleasure, and I miss them even now. In an impoverished time they were my first introduction to an indoor beauty, of luxury and ornament, ceremony and sacrament and mystery. I remember still the tex-

Many novelists felt that their Catholic faith was not really compatible with their artistic function. They therefore tended to treat of Catholicism in a negative fashion, emphasising how it led to twisted attitudes to sexuality. This is what McGahern has to say about the issue: 'Authority's writ ran from God the Father down and could not be questioned. Violence reigned as often as not in the homes as well. One of the compounds at its base was sexual sickness and frustration, as sex was seen, officially, as unclean and sinful, allowable only when it too was licensed.'⁹ Other chapters in this book chart in far greater detail the complicated issue of Catholic identity in the last century and the first years of the present one. Catholicism does feature significantly in numerous Irish novels but never in a way that would lead one to attach the title Catholic literature to any of them. In this respect, I think the definition of the Catholic novel supplied by Albert Sonnenfeld is helpful:

It is a novel written by a Catholic, using Catholicism as its informing mythopoeic structure or generative symbolic system, and where the principal and decisive issue is the salvation or damnation of the hero or heroine.¹⁰

There is no such tradition that I can detect in the Irish novel. There are Irish novels with Catholicism as their core element, without ever quite managing to be 'Catholic novels' and we will look briefly at two of those now: John Broderick's *The Pilgrimage* (1961) and Brian Moore's *Catholics* (1983). I have written elsewhere about Kate O'Brien and John McGahern's treatment of Catholicism and how both were keenly aware of the positive role the religion of their youth and early adulthood played in their lives. O'Brien's *The Ante-Room* is, in fact, the closest Ireland

ture of the plain, brown, flat cardboard boxes in which the red and white and yellow tulips for the altar came on the bus when there were no flowers anywhere. I think not of the great ceremonies of Christmas and Easter in that small church facing Henry's but of the Stations of the Cross in Lent and the feast of Corpus Christi (*Memoir*, p 201).

9. *Memoir*, p 18.

10. Albert Sonnenfeld, *Crossroads: Essays on the Catholic Novelists* (York (South Carolina): French Literature Publishing Company, 1980), p vii.

has come to producing a Catholic novel.¹¹ My choice of Broderick and Moore is predicated on the fact that they are representative of a number of fictional representations of Catholic preoccupations as represented in the Irish novel of the twentieth century. Broderick (1924-1989) was born into the Athlone family renowned for its bread. He lost his father at a young age and was then very pained to see his mother remarry, especially as her choice of husband was the debonair and flighty manager of the family bakery, Paddy Flynn. In addition to his domestic problems, Broderick also suffered from a common Irish failing, alcoholism, a disease that was almost certainly exacerbated by his inability to reconcile his homosexual leanings with his deeply held spiritual convictions. Broderick was slightly paradoxical in terms of his Catholicism: he combined a serious aversion to the 'progressive' tendencies of Vatican II – he fundamentally disagreed with the removal of Latin from the liturgy and opened discussions on this topic with the line: 'Before the Mass was abolished!' – with a desire to open up Ireland to more enlightened European influences. He was a friend of the French American writer, Julien Green, and admitted several times that Mauriac was the only literary influence of whom he was aware. He read and spoke French well and it is certain that he was aware of the impact of the 'Catholic novel' in France and elsewhere in the world. He does not appear, however, to have followed a similar course in his own writings. Nevertheless, Catholicism is a permanent feature of his novels, some of which were very daring for the time. For example, *An Apology for Roses* (1973), describes among other things a priest's affair with a female parishioner. *The Trial of Father Dillingham* (1982) deals quite movingly with the love and care a homosexual couple lavish on one another. Broderick shone a light into the dark recesses of provincial Ireland at a time when most people were not quite ready for such a stark delineation of the reality that was around

11. Kate O'Brien and John McGahern are deliberately omitted from the present article as they form the basis of a book chapter the soon-to-be-published 2004 IASIL proceedings.

them but that they failed to see. Broderick's commitment to his faith can be gauged from the fact that after his mother's death, in 1974, he went to discuss the possibility of becoming a priest with Fr Peter Connolly, then Professor of English in Maynooth College and someone who was most supportive of his literary efforts. In a robust interview with David Hanly shortly before his death, Broderick made the following comment:

Anyone who is reared in a Catholic atmosphere first of all takes in that Catholic atmosphere more or less through their pores.

It reminds one of the heroine of Graham Greene's novel, *The End of the Affair*, who, baptised without her knowledge by her mother, imagines in later life that she caught 'belief like a disease'. Certainly, Broderick, in common with several other Irish writers, could do little to escape his Catholic upbringing. In fact, he often stated that any important religious decisions in his life were dictated by what he learned in primary school from Sister Margaret Mary's teaching of the Penny Catechism. But what of his first, and in my view, his best, novel and its treatment of Catholicism? Well, its plot is labyrinthine for such a short book. It recounts how Julia Glynn, the wife of a wealthy builder in a midlands town, engages in sexual adventures with various partners, most notably her husband's nephew, Jim, a doctor, and the manservant, Stephen, who is responsible for sending her anonymous and lurid letters describing her affair with Jim. Julia's husband, Michael, several years her senior, has been crippled with arthritis since shortly after their marriage, and is encouraged by the local priest, Fr Victor, to undertake a trip to Lourdes, where he may get a cure. Nobody really believes that the miracle will take place, but they indulge Michael by having Masses said for his special intention. Julia's main concern in the build-up to their departure is that Michael will discover her liaison with Jim, and so she is relieved when she learns that it is Stephen, mad with jealousy, who is responsible for the horrible letters. She ends up having an affair then with the manservant, which, because Jim's forthcoming marriage to the daughter of a wealthy and influen-

tial figure will deprive her of a regular sexual partner, suits her quite well. She is someone who appears to need lovers in the same way as others crave food or wealth. An easy conscience makes her adultery more pleasurable: 'She had never at any time suffered from a sense of sin.'¹²

While Julia is certainly no saint, she is not portrayed in a more negative light than those with whom she shares her life. During their honeymoon, her husband became besotted with a German man, with whom he subsequently carried on an intimate correspondence. His infrequent acts of intercourse with his wife were characterised by brutality. In fact, there is something prurient about the way the men in this novel regard sex. This is Julia's assessment of Stephen:

She doubted if Stephen, who, she had no doubt, loved her in his own fashion, would ever be able to dissociate lovemaking from the furtive, the sordid, and the unclean. Few Irishmen, she knew, ever were. The puritanism which was bred in their bones, and encouraged in their youth by every possible outside pressure, was never entirely eradicated (p 171).

This is an excellent observation, not merely in relation to the Irish male psyche of a few decades ago, but also with regard to the difficulty presented to the Catholic novelist by sex. In the Ireland of the 1960s, much emphasis was laid on avoiding 'occasions of sin', 'bad thoughts' and these applied for the most part to any sexual practice or inclination outside of marriage. The challenge for the Catholic novelist is to reveal the workings of God within the world of humanity, without engaging in prurience or superficial piety. According to the famous French critic, Charles du Bos, those Catholic critics who place a blanket ban on 'impurity' in fiction are wrong because human life involves impurity. Broderick had a good grasp of theology. He recognised the frailties of the human state but also the possibilities of salvation afforded by prayer and faith. The last sentence of *The*

12. John Broderick, *The Pilgrimage* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2004), p 24. All my references will be to this edition with page numbers in brackets.

Pilgrimage caused major controversy: 'In this way they set off on their pilgrimage, from which a week later Michael returned completely cured' (p 191). It may well have been this line, more than the daring descriptions of Julia's sexual escapades, that caused the book to be banned in Ireland. It was considered blasphemous that a sinner like Michael should be the recipient of grace. In his Introduction to the French version of the novel, which has been translated and included in last year's Lilliput edition, Julien Green stated his admiration for an 'extraordinarily gripping book', and asked why anyone should see blasphemy in the miraculous cure of an old, debauched man. 'Since when has healing been exclusively available to the just?' he asks (p 2). Green makes a valid point here: there are many examples in the gospels of God's understanding of, and love for, sinners. By introducing the notion of miracles and grace, John Broderick was dealing with material that had the potential to render many Irish people uncomfortable. It was one thing to suggest that an exemplary Christian should be the beneficiary of grace, quite another to have it bestowed on a sinner like Michael Glynn. But, as we have seen, from a theological standpoint Broderick was far from suggesting anything untoward in the cure of his protagonist. The core element of *The Pilgrimage* does not, however, revolve around the salvation or damnation of its main character, Julia. Michael is the recipient of grace but at no stage do we come to a good knowledge of what type of relationship he has with God. So we cannot describe this as a 'Catholic novel'.

Brian Moore's *Catholics* is more a novella than a novel and it too deals with the issues of faith and salvation. The setting is Muck Abbey, a remote island monastery off the Kerry coast, where the monks have started saying the Latin Mass again, in contravention of the ecumenical thrust of Vatican IV. The clash between the traditional and the modern is finely drawn as James Kinsella, a progressive American priest, is sent to Ireland with the task of bringing the monks in line with Rome's new stance. The Abbot of Muck, Tomás O'Malley, who has lost his faith, is a man who cares for his community and worries about what the

imposition of the ban will do to them. Pilgrims had flocked to Cahirciveen to attend the traditional Mass said at the foot of Mount Coom:

Most could see the Mass rock and the priest only from a distance, but all heard the Latin, thundering from loudspeakers rigged up by townsfolk. Latin. The communion bell. Monks as altar-boys saying the Latin responses. Incense. The old way.¹³

This is the type of ceremony that is so nostalgically evoked by Broderick: the use of Latin and incense, the priest with his back to the congregation, bells ringing. Sadly for Broderick, as for the monks of Muck Abbey, 'the old way' is not Rome's way and this is the message James Kinsella carries with him to the remote island. When bad weather and the refusal of two locals to take him across in their boat because they do not believe he is a priest, prevent Kinsella from gaining access to the island, he arrives in a helicopter. He is greeted by the Abbot with the following remark: 'You've brought us the symbol of the century. Just when I thought we'd be able to close the hundred years out, and say we missed our time' (p 30). There is a definite sense in which Kinsella is depicted as the modern global cleric for whom there are few, if any, obstacles that cannot be overcome. He has all the trump cards, the power invested in him by Rome, technology, sophistication. The monks resent his arrival, as they know that it signals change. One, Fr Manus, asks what can possibly be wrong with saying Mass in Latin. Surely the reverence of the sacrifice, the adoration of the sacrament, are positive things:

And we did it that way for nearly two thousand years and, in all that time, the church was a place to be quiet in, and respectful, it was a hushed place because God was there, God on the altar, in the tabernacle in the form of a wafer of bread and a chalice of wine. It was God's house, where, every day, the daily miracle took place. God coming down among us. A

13. Brain Moore, *Catholics* (London: Triad/Panther Books, 1983), p 10. All subsequent references will be to this edition, with the page number in brackets.

mystery. Just as this new Mass isn't a mystery, it's a mockery, a singsong (p 43).

Fr Manus is the mouthpiece for many of the reservations expressed by some Irish people in the wake of Vatican II. They found it difficult to adapt to the liturgy in the vernacular and hankered back to the time when the ceremony was shrouded in mystery.¹⁴ Moore wrote this novel at a time when the Catholic Church appeared to be headed in a more progressive direction. During the last decades of the pontificate of John Paul II, however, that trend seemed to be largely reversed as more emphasis was placed on orthodoxy and conformity. The following statement by Kinsella is pertinent: 'We are trying to create a uniform posture within the Church. If everyone decides to worship in his own way – well, it's obvious, it would create a disunity' (p 55). This is a position that hasn't changed. The central authority vested in the pope is designed in such a way as to ensure that the faithful all over the world worship in a similar fashion and adhere to the same fundamentals in terms of dogma. Rome was alerted to the situation of the monks when television crews filmed the rock Mass and relayed it across the globe. This could not be tolerated.

The question of the Abbot's loss of faith is a central element in the novel and it has a connection with John Broderick's *The Pilgrimage*. It occurred during a visit he made to Lourdes when he was shocked by the tawdry religious supermarkets, the certifications of 'miraculous' cures, the lines of stretchers and wheelchairs on which lay the desperate and the ill. It caused Tomás O'Malley to flee to his hotel room where he was unable to say

14. Louise Fuller notes: 'A central theme of the Vatican Council had been that new symbols, new ways of communicating Christ's message, would have to be found, which would make sense in a rapidly changing world. However, a recurring theme, echoed by commentators reflecting on the Irish situation in the post-Vatican era, was that, despite the updated liturgy, the correlation between life and liturgy, as envisaged by the Council, had not been achieved. Writing in *The Furrow* in 1979, Fr Eamonn Bredin ... observed that the new liturgy seemed to "have left the inner core of people's lives untouched."' (*Irish Catholicism Since 1950*, p 122)

his prayers. He had not been able to pray since that time. Afterwards he immersed himself in his work and even managed to rule his abbey without betraying his loss of faith. When he is faced with the disappointment and possible rebellion of the monks, to whom he must announce the decision that he has reached – that they will conform to Rome's dictate – he finds somewhere deep within him the key to spiritual fulfilment. It does not matter, he tells the monks, what means you employ to adore God. He is there in the tabernacle when you believe in the real presence: 'Prayer is the only miracle', he said. 'We pray. If our words become prayer, God will come' (p 91). While he mumbles the words of the 'Our Father', readers have the impression that he may have regained his faith.

Moore comes closer than Broderick to writing a Catholic novel but, once more, there is not sufficient emphasis on the Abbot's salvation or damnation for *Catholics* to be placed in the same category as *The Power and the Glory* or *The Diary of a Country Priest*. Moore often admitted that he was fascinated with those who had faith and many of his novels explore the sort of loss of faith he himself experienced at a young age. His writings borrow heavily on Catholic rituals and practices especially with characters like Judith Hearne who finds that her religion, scrupulously observed for years, deserts her in her hour of need:

God! Miss Hearne said bitterly. What does *He* care? Is there a God at all, I've been asking myself, because if there is, why does he never answer our prayers? Why does He allow all these things to happen?¹⁵

There is clearly a lot more that could be said in relation to Moore's representation of Catholicism. What this short exposé seeks to do is to underline how Catholicism is used by writers like himself and Broderick as a means of reflecting an important ingredient of Irish society that was beginning to wane, even as early as a few decades ago. Perhaps the time is now ripe, in an Ireland that has become increasingly secular and where conse-

15. Brian Moore, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (London: Flamingo, 1994), p 229.

quently many are beginning to recognise that Catholicism, for all that it is not a perfect system, still meets a need for mystery and the transcendent that is keenly felt by many, for a Catholic novel to emerge in this country. It could be a voice from the margins, quietly suggesting the possibility that another world may exist beyond the material one. Maybe Ireland will one day supply what Whitehouse said has not emerged as of yet:

In the Catholic novel, there was a movement away from a picture of human beings working out their own destiny towards a presentation of them in a dialectical and critical relationship to their formative culture, where the old lexis – 'faith', 'grace', 'sin', 'salvation', 'redemption', 'hope', 'charity' – is largely meaningless. To date, there is no clear sign of the emergence of what may come next, a totally post-Vatican II Catholic novelist (Whitehouse, p 20).